

# DOINGWHATWORKS



## Slideshow

FULL DETAILS AND TRANSCRIPT

### Partnering General and Special Education

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Pennsylvania Department of Education, Pennsylvania

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**Topic:** Response to Intervention in Elementary-Middle Math  
**Practice:** RtI Implementation

#### Highlights

- Dr. John Tommasini and Dr. Edward Vollbrecht talk about Pennsylvania's approach to implementing an RtI instructional framework.
- How the framework is used to coordinate the state's standards-aligned system.
- Dr. Vollbrecht describes policy changes related to building a partnership between the state's general and special education bureaus.
- How all students receive instruction in the general education standards-aligned system through the core curriculum and interventions is explained.
- Dr. Tommasini discusses capacity building and the importance of providing training and technical assistance to districts and schools.
- The need to train school principals in allocating instructional resources and supporting staff through ongoing training and coaching is addressed.
- Pennsylvania's expansion into districts and schools across the state, including middle and high schools, is highlighted.
- How to sustain high-quality instruction through staff collaboration and shared responsibility for students is discussed.

## Full Transcript

Presentation title: Partnering General and Special Education

Title Slide: Partnering General and Special Education

Pennsylvania Department of Education

Pennsylvania has established the Response to Intervention model as the framework for organizing and implementing the state's standards-aligned system to improve student achievement and facilitate the school improvement process. John Tommasini, director of the Bureau of Special Education, and Edward Vollbrecht, director of the Bureau of Teaching and Learning Support, discuss how this has affected education in Pennsylvania.

Slide 1: Response to Instruction and Intervention

Text: In Pennsylvania, response to intervention is referred to as Response to Instruction and Intervention (RtII). The goal is for all students to receive high-quality, research-based instruction in the general education standards-aligned system through the core curriculum and interventions.

*Edward Vollbrecht talks about RtII.*

Audio: We have a division of interventions and within that falls the Response to Intervention, or we call the Response to Instruction and Intervention, emphasizing then the fact that there is a core for all students that every student, regardless of their needs and so forth, must have. RtII is the implementation of the standards-aligned system. It's actually what our overarching architecture is all about, and it demonstrates it both in teaching and learning.

Slide 2: Build a Leadership Partnership

Text: RtII has brought together the Commonwealth's general education and special education systems to improve instruction for all students. The partnership begins at the top level of administration, enabling the state to provide coherent services to schools and districts through coordination, communication, and joint planning between the bureaus.

*John Tommasini talks about the importance of collaboration for all children.*

Audio: We have a collaborative and cooperative education effort between special education and general education, and we really look at all children, each child, because all children are important and all children can learn. And it wouldn't happen if we had separate systems. The system of education in Pennsylvania, where we have the blend of general and special ed focusing on All Means All, is really what it's all about.

### Slide 3: Make Policy Changes

Text: RtII is a part of the state's comprehensive system of continuous school improvement. RtII is the structure that coordinates standards-aligned instruction, instructional strategies, and interventions.

*Edward Vollbrecht discusses policy changes related to building a partnership.*

Audio: When we began RtII some years ago under the Department of Education Leadership, it required some policy changes with regards to what we call Basic Education Circulars that we sent out, giving a policy statement and a format and structure for what we believed RtII should look at. Again, fundamentally saying this is a general education initiative in a partnership with special education.

### Slide 4: Provide Instruction to All Children

Text: The state's RtII framework promotes shared ownership of student learning across staff and programs. Silos of service delivery are eliminated as all staff (general education teachers, special education teachers, Title I, ESL, migrant, paraprofessionals, etc.) assume an active role through related instructional tiers. Through the RtII related tiers, all staff share responsibility for all students.

*John Tommasini describes shared responsibility for student learning.*

Audio: We always had special education and general education. I think during this administration and the direction and leadership of our secretary, one of the things that we have been able to do is get away from a siloed system of education to where it's really a standards-aligned system for all children. And we were doing that before the federal regulations and the implementation of Response to Intervention. And I think as you look at what we are doing, we are focusing on all children and instruction for all children, not instruction focused on special education, not instruction focused on general education, but instruction for all children.

### Slide 5: Change Perspective Toward Intervention

Text: RtII is the responsibility of general education. A change in culture has occurred in how the state's schools approach instruction. Core instruction comes first followed by a series of increasingly intense interventions as soon as a student is identified as at risk. Special education is considered only after assessment confirms a student is not making progress in the available tiers of instruction.

*Edward Vollbrecht explains the importance of starting with core instruction.*

Audio: What has happened in Pennsylvania is that the RtII program has basically become a responsibility for general education. It's a partnership with special education, but when we talk about it, it comes out of general education. It's our belief that the changes that need to occur in schools are in the general education

program, not in the special education program per se. So that, then, has an effect I think in terms of changing the culture of how you approach interventional strategies for all students. So that we, again, start out with a core and then from that core develop degrees of interventions for students in Pennsylvania.

#### Slide 6: Focus on Early Prevention

Text: Early detection and prevention is the goal of RtI. The model provides high-quality core instruction and assistance to at-risk students before they fall behind.

*John Tommasini comments on special education and RtII.*

Audio: If you historically look at special education, students had to fail in order to receive intervention. It was always kind of an interesting philosophy that before we can provide the intervention that students needed, they had to fail. I think that the Response to Instruction and Intervention has allowed us to provide those kinds of interventions that students need prior to failure. I know in Pennsylvania we use the Response to Instruction and Intervention; we use a discrepancy model in the identification of a student for severe learning disabilities. But one of the things that we have noted is the reduction in the number of referrals to special education because of those types of interventions. And I think for a long time we were missing our target when we forced children to fail to get the kind of interventions they need in order to succeed; the reality is our focus is all on achievement and student outcomes and positive instruction, and in order to have a child fail to get to those specific pieces was very, very difficult. And now we are able to provide that kind of support to students so that all students can learn and all students are part of the standards-aligned system in Pennsylvania.

#### Slide 7: Build the Capacity of Schools

Text: The Pennsylvania Training and Technical Assistance Network (PaTTAN) is the system the state has created to provide leadership for RtII implementation and comprehensive and consistent training to ensure fidelity of implementation throughout the state. PaTTAN supports the efforts and initiatives of the Bureau of Special Education and builds the capacity of local educational agencies to serve students who receive special education services.

*John Tommasini talks about training and technical assistance.*

Audio: We have a system called the Pennsylvania Training and Technical Assistance Network. We have three offices across the state: Philadelphia, Pittsburgh, and Harrisburg. And that's really the training and technical assistance arm of the Bureau of Special Education, got a lot of working in collaboration with the Bureau of Teaching and Learning. And it's our way or our vehicle to reach out to our 500 school districts, 29 intermediate units, 160 charter schools. We don't have the staff within the Department of Education to

provide the training and the resources needed to implement an initiative like Response to Instruction and Intervention without the Pennsylvania Training and Technical Assistance Network. I think that's the vehicle that has brought together general education and special education.

#### Slide 8: Establish a Support Network

Text: RtII is a multi-year process that requires the realignment and reengineering of school infrastructure. The PaTTAN centers develop training courses, offer technical assistance, and provide resources to build the skills of intermediate unit and general and special education school staff in order to improve achievement for all children.

*Edward Vollbrecht discusses coordinating services and resources.*

Audio: When I first came to the Department of Education, it appeared to me that there were a number of silos in the department, and I think the initiative of RtII has helped break that down. One of the things that we needed to do and we did is this partnership with special education. That's been coordinated by our assistive technologies and by our PaTTAN. They are really the cornerstone and the major implementer in bringing these two bureaus together: the Bureau of Special Education and the Bureau of Teaching and Learning. They are the ones that coordinate and see that what we are implementing makes sense and that it's consistent and that it's defined.

#### Slide 9: Train School Principals

Text: The allocation of instructional resources is key to RtII implementation and may require shifts in time allocation, scheduling, and staffing patterns. The building principal's role is critical in developing shared ownership and ensuring all role changes are planned and supported with appropriate training and coaching.

*John Tommasini emphasizes the need for strong building-level leadership.*

Audio: Finding leaders, and strong leaders in buildings, is very difficult; to be able to reach out and provide the training that is needed to building principals. Because they are the instructional leaders in their buildings, and if there is going to be a change and a positive impact on instruction and student achievement, it will be driven and it will start with the building principal. And it's very difficult to be able to reach out to all of those folks and find those kinds of things, but the ability to have strong leadership in buildings is where it all starts.

#### Slide 10: Expanding Across the State

Text: The Pennsylvania State Department of Education provides guidelines and other materials to support

implementation in schools and districts throughout the state. While RtII varies from school to school, all must fit within the parameters of the state's model. All training materials are coordinated to achieve this result.

*John Tommasini describes statewide implementation.*

Audio: It's leadership, it's resources, it's assessment of children. All the things that we are doing, and the funding of pilot projects, constant training. But the dilemma that you face and the problem that you run into is that you take small steps to reach 500 school districts. We started out with pilot programs and pilot projects like this in elementary buildings. We moved to middle school, and we will work on secondary. We have a tendency in the education world to focus everything on elementary and high school and leave out middle school, and we really need to work at the secondary level with secondary RtI.

#### Slide 11: Expanding Into Middle and High Schools

Text: While RtI is common in the elementary grades, there are fewer attempts targeting middle and secondary schools. Pennsylvania has created a framework for secondary implementation that includes recommendations related to the components and stages of secondary-level implementation and a comparison of differences regarding systems-level change at the secondary level. PaTTAN provides guidelines and tools for secondary implementation.

*Edward Vollbrecht comments on RtII at the secondary level.*

Audio: Where we are going next is a challenge. We are moving more into the secondary level. Last year we moved to middle-level education and middle schools, and I think it's a cultural issue; it's taking time in rescheduling in such a way that teachers can have an opportunity to talk with each other about students.

#### Slide 12: Sustaining a Collaborative Model

Text: Pennsylvania has seen positive results from its RtII implementation, including a reduction in inappropriate referrals to special education of ethnic-minority students, low-income students, and other at-risk populations in particular. The state continually evaluates the impact the model has on students, teachers, and schools to ensure that all students are receiving appropriate instruction and becoming proficient readers.

*John Tommasini highlights ways to sustain high-quality instruction.*

Audio: One of the biggest priorities we have is to be able to look at our colleges and universities, our postsecondary and higher education system, and focus on the embedding of the Response to Intervention and Instruction model in the training that the new teachers are going to leave school with. I think we

need to continue to be able to find additional resources to school districts to be able to build and develop programs. We have to continue to assess the work that we do and not just assume that it's going to work, but have data to tell us that it's working and not accept anything less than the fact that all students can learn.